DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 579 CS 215 421

AUTHOR Maxwell, Janis K.
TITLE Granting Authority to Multivocal Student Writing.
PUB DATE 28 Mar 96
NOTE 4p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Self Concept; Sex Stereotypes; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Expectations of Students; Teacher Student Relationship; Writing (Composition); *Writing Assignments; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; Authority; *Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

Postmodernism claims to shatter the mirage of essentialism by denying the image of a unified self. The result, it asserts, is the freedom to assume a new kind of authority, signified in the image of the "subject position." It assumes, further, that because the writer is capable of multiple selves, he or she will perforce manifest multiple voices. A close look at classroom practice, however, shows that this is not the case. Teachers are typically uncomfortable with unconventional voices and unwilling to encourage them. Data from recent studies show that the commentary of writing teachers and their evaluation of essays force students to fit themselves into very narrow confines of discourse and voice. Teachers are shutting down individual voices. A single student with different approaches (i.e., three voices) to writing assignments illustrates the kinds of problems posed when students choose not to follow--or are unable to follow--the narrow parameters of academic writing. It is tragic that capable students should find themselves defeated by the limitations of academic discourse. A study of 64 subjects--half teachers, half students--showed that both valued the formalist approach to evaluation above all others, that is, stylistic correctness according to convention. The study also showed that teachers and students expected student writing to conform to certain gender expectations and were assessed by how well they fit into those expectations. A solution for the student is to master the conventional voice. For teachers, it means recognizing that on the other end of every piece of writing, there is someone there, not something. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"Granting Authority to Multivocal Student Writing"
delivered by Dr. Janis E. Haswell, Washington State University
Conference of College Composition and Ccommunication
March 28, 1996 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

I would like to preface my remarks with what I think are three self-evident statements. 1) We all have experienced a feature in student texts we call "personal voice"--that sense of authority that expresses the true self and exhibits the natural style of the student. 2) Voice allows the text to "speak" to us and touch us with the personal presence that is so refreshing, perhaps so necessary, as we labor through piles of student papers. To hear it is like a breath of fresh air to a drowning swimmer. 3) In our postmodern age, the idea of a single voice has come under fire. Postmodernism claims to shatter the mirage of essentialism by denying the image of a unified self. The result, it asserts, is the freedom to assume a new kind of authority, signified in the image of the "subject position." Because a writer is capable of multiple subject positions, and in fact is a convergence of multiple selves, he or she will perforce manifest multiple voices.

This conflict of multiple voices versus the personal voice assumes center stage in Kathleen Yancey's recent collection of essays entitled Voices on Voice. In these discussions my three self-evident statements come together in a confluence of contradictions between what we experience, what we value, and what we know.

I'd like to reposition the subject of voice and student writing away from conflicting theories and toward issues of power in the classroom. Consider this question: What does it mean to exercise authority as a writer? I will argue on two fronts. First: while we encounter multiple voices in the classroom, either in terms of a collective chorus of diverse voices from many writers, or a variety of voices from the same writer, we are uncomfortable, unwilling, or unprepared to encourage those "voices." I will use data from recent studies to show that our commentary and evaluation of student essays force writers to fit themselves into very narrow confines of discourse and voice. This is a disturbing observation--we all want to "empower" our students. We care about the writers who come into our classes. Yet individual student's "voices" are being shut down.

My second argument is that postmodernism is only a trick of mirrors. No matter what the theory claims, postmodernism only camouflages old, entrenched powers at work. Despite the ideology of multiple selves and subject positions and author-functions and multi-glossia and the argument that a writer isn't an autonomous, static self but plays multiple roles or parts in society, students are still restrained by their student-function and teachers still perpetuate traditional expressions of gender and class by exercising their omniscient teacher-function.

Let me proceed with my first argument--that teachers repress voices-- in three steps. The first stage will be to describe the plight of several writers from one of my courses last semester.

ED 398 879
CS 215 941
PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Haswell
2
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

1. Writer #1: an older student, returning to academic life after many years. In her first semester back, she struggles with formal testing situations. Despite the fact that she keeps up with the readings on a daily basis, she has a difficult time writing an organized essay that shows she can distinguish the important ingredients from the incidental. When she receives a "D" on her first test, she leaves the classroom crying.

2. Writer #2: a first-year voice student, who writes an essay after attending a concert featuring Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and her favorite, Josef Haydn. Because she had visited Haydn's home in Burgenland, she writes an imaginative, almost lyrical description of the composer's life and music, which she characterizes as "sparkling with singular good humor and unspoiled straight forwardness." I marvel at her ability to identify and capture the mystery of this music that speaks to her so profoundly.

3. Writer #3: assigned to a group project, this student elects to write the script for a presentation on the Holocaust. After weeks of research, she rejects an analytic or historical approach. Instead, she interweaves first-hand narratives of ghetto victims, Auschwitz survivors, footage from Schindler's List, and even speeches from Adolph Hitler, into a moving and artistic ceremony. Each presenter reads the words of one of the victims--voices out of history--and passes a burning candle down the line to the last member of the group, who acts as the voice of Hitler and snuffs out that candle. At first the class has a difficult time catching on., but they quickly realize that they have entered into a very non-conventional but important ritual to honor the twelve million dead.

There are two points to make here. Writer #1, who has difficulty executing a formal essay under pressure, may not survive in college if she continually or exclusively is asked to write academic discourse without figuring out how to do that. Writer #2 may also encounter disaster, if teachers aren't touched by her lyricism about Haydn but instead want to see a developed argument supported by concrete details and correct citations from the concert program. And Writer #3 is also courting disaster, considering that her script for the group presentation did not meet the requirements of the assignment, which was to identify a current events problem, research historical background, and offer solutions. If the other students can't even take notes, then what's the value?

It will be tragic if any of these writers are defeated by the requirements of academic discourse, or if their unique voice is rejected because it does not fit the accepted or normative "voice"-- and here I mean academic exposition. Now I will move into step two, turning away from my three writers momentarily to focus on recent empirical studies that reveal how in practice, teachers repress multiple voices.

Three years ago, Richard Haswell and I interviewed 64 participants (half of them teachers, half students of entry-level composition) who offered suggestions for revision and evaluative comments on two student essays, one written by a female, one by a male. After these 64 interviews, we classified 800 pages of

evaluative comments according to Richard Fulkerson's four axiologies, or what is valued in writing [on overhead]:

1) mimetic--the writer's success in conveying objective reality truthfully;

2) expressive--the writer's success in expressing psychological states such as openness, sincerity, or authenticity;

3) rhetorical--the writer's success in conveying his/her purpose to an audience;

4) formalist--the writer's success in creating a conventionally correct or stylistically approved text. To these four we added one more:

5) situational--the writer's success in handling the pragmatic demands of the assignment.

Note the distribution of commentary. Expressive critique weighed in a 4.6%, mimetic critique at 5.8, rhetorical at 7.8, situational at 14.9. By far, the most frequently used axiology was formalist, accounting for 61% of the responses to these writers, nearly 2/3 of all commentary.

What does this mean? Well, students may be mimicking how their teachers mark their papers. Teachers may be reflecting institutional concerns about accountability. . . state politicians asking why *Johnny* and *Jane* can't write Standard Written English out of college. But deep down, there is a political agenda here that feminists and others have alerted us to. What formalism ultimately says is that there is one and only one correct and acceptable discourse in academe. Students must master it or they will not succeed, either here or in the larger world. This discourse has been characterized as "Eurocentric and patrifocal" (Derrick Owens) and controls a constricting, narrow exercise of critique that operates in composition classrooms in my institution, probably in yours, 2 out of 3 times that teachers or peer reviewers comment on student papers. This is occurring despite theoretical emphasis on audience awareness, diversity, gender neutrality, and multicultural rhetorics. Whatever value we place on "voices," teachers are constraining voice by imposing a single standard of style and rhetoric.

Our study is not unique in this particular finding. In 1991 Robert Schwegler found that in marginal and summative commentary on students papers, teachers were "predominantly formalist and implicitly authoritarian." In 1993, John Connors and Andrea Lunsford reported that in their study on teacher commentary, 84% centered on organization and supporting details, with very little attention to content or to the students themselves. (CCC 44.2: 200-223).

The second finding I will describe is what we call "gender tailoring." What we found was that readers advanced very different comments about recommendations for revision depending on if the writer were identified as male or female. The real or perceived female writer was advised to personalize her answer, to be sensitive to other points of view, to move away from abstract thinking, and to deepen her ideas by working from the heart. The real or perceived male writer was advised to be more abstract and logical in his

argument, to be less wordy, to clean up mistakes in usage, and to care more about the assignment.

How does this connect to the issue of "voice"? We noticed that these recommendations aligned themselves to discussion with our readers (this occurred after they offered recommenndations for revision) when asked if men and women write differently. In responding to that question, our readers revealed their assumptions and expectations about how gender operates. Women were seen first of all as better writers, then as more personal and caring, less abstract or logical, more concrete, more sensitive to other perspectives. Men were described in opposite terms, with the addition that they tended to blow off assignments and often wrote just to get a requirement out of the way.

If we compare recommendations for revision to these cultural expectations, we see amazing similarities [overhead]. Our readers did not consciously set out to tailor writing to gender stereotypes, to reward woman if she sounded like a woman should or to penalize her if she wrote too much like a man. But that is exactly what they did, and were not aware that they were doing so. Like most of us, they were committed for being objective, professional, and gender neutral in their assessment. But their practice violated those conscious values.

This analysis is supported by the findings of Linda Brodkey in her study of letters exchanged between adult basic writers and their teachers in 1989. She finds evidence of what she labels "discursive hegemony," when under the banner of cultural literacy or gender, class, and racial neutrality, students are forced to "articulate themselves as the subjects teachers represent, or not at all."

The empirical evidence shows that teachers censor forms of discourse on the basis of narrow standards of correctness, regardless of contextual factors or the background, design, and purpose of the writer. We censor different ways of enacting gender and class and perhaps race on the basis of acceptable or normative performance. In a word, we reduce the potential "constellation of voices" (borrowing Gesa Kirsch's phrase) to one acceptable voice that communicates academic discourse and stereotypical gender, class, or racial behavior.

This is exactly the kinds of disasters that my three writers may not survive. What a loss if these voices could not be heard. This brings me to the third step in my argument. A trick of my own. Instead of three different writers, each with a distinctive voice, I have described to you three of the voices belonging to a single, distinctive writer. Her name is Becky. Becky is the returning woman student, majoring in music, taking voice, devoted to Haydn, with a poetic soul, keen mind, and dramatic presence. Her range of "voices" is as complex and varied as postmoderns argue.

Working with the results of our study, and then watching Becky struggle with academic discourse, has forced me to take a hard look at the contradiction between the daily practice in writing classrooms and what postmodern theory promises--to free the multiple voices of student writers. The reason for failure

isn't that teachers are out of touch with theory, but that this particular theory offers no warnings or safeguards against the struggle for control of authority over student writing. As Brodkey points out, the "subject position" is vulnerable to raw power issues. But it leaves students more vulnerable than before by denying them agency. This is the failure of postmodern theory, which tells me Becky has voices because she is hopelessly fragmented, because she is entirely constructed by forces beyond her control; because she has no power or free agency of her own.

True, some postmoderns hope that by helping students become aware of the forces that shape them, they can be freed by that awareness. But if students are not free agents when they walk in, if they are not somebody but something, then no influence of yours or mine will generate a "free" act in the classroom. Writers can only regurgitate social or racial or class positions and mouth the voices of those forces that produce them. Maybe that's the point--a theory that tells teachers we can help students free themselves from social forces, and at the same time forces students to ape the rhetoric of the collective community as they adapt to our formalist scaffolding.

Ultimately I wonder if that isn't the ideology behind postmodern theory--to perpetuate the status quo by *dehumanizing* Becky down to her social, political, or economic roles, her author- or mother- or student function . It certainly makes it is easier for us to reduce her down to that one voice our discourse community finds familiar and comfortable, that we can manipulative because we have mastered it, that protects us from having to be apprentices of different discourses ourselves.

So I return to my opening question: what does it mean to exercise authority as a writer? For Becky, it means developing strategies to master the conventional voice. It also means developing other discourses that she is drawn to, including non-Western rhetorics, creative and lyrical styles. For teachers, it means to be more critical of the voices of theories that speak about "allowing" students to write out of multiple discourses, as if we have the authority to grant them such permission or ability; theories that *dehumanize* students and *impersonalize* our jobs, enabling us to be more critical of their purpose, intent, and desire as writers; theories that *dazzle* us with images of functions and positions to explain the multiple voices each student creates, as if that capability exists outside of that writer and not within so that we have free license to control those voices. Perhaps most importantly, it means recognizing that on the other end of every piece of writing, there is someone there, not something.

And Becky, I'm sorry about that "D."